Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown (*Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*, 1988)

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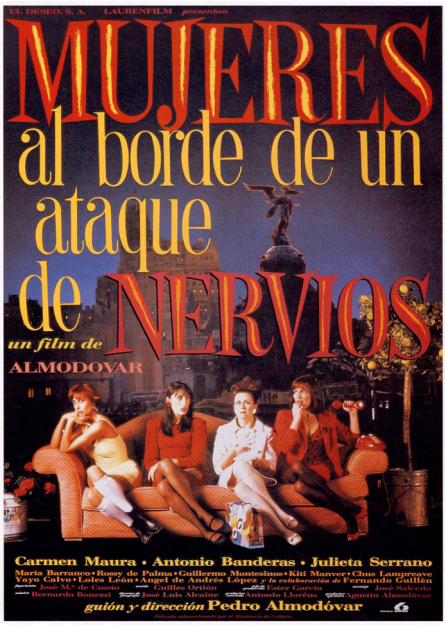
dir. Pedro Almodóvar Caballero; prod. Agustín Almodóvar; screenplay Pedro Almodóvar Caballero; photography José Luis Alcaine; music Bernardo Bonezzi. 35mm, color, 88 mins. Lauren Film, distrib. Lauren Film.



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Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios is an early, and to this day one of the best-known, works by Spanish director Pedro Almodóvar Caballero. Often considered a comedy due to Almodóvar's irreverent humor, the film clearly also qualifies as a melodrama in the postmodernist vein with its unique approach to the topics of desire, sexuality, and love (Deleyto). Taking (uncredited) inspiration from Jean Cocteau's 1930 one-act play *La Voix Humaine*, which consists of one woman's monologue, the film is populated by various women who are in the middle of a meltdown, already beyond, or slowly approaching one. It surely fails the Bechdel test, created by Alison Bechdel in 1985, which measures female representation in film and television by evaluating whether women on screen speak about topics other than men. The women in the film—Pepa (played by Carmen Maura), Lucía (Julieta Serrano), Candela (María Barranco), and Paulina (Kiti Mánver)—stick mostly to conversing about the men who are the reasons for their breakdowns, current or past.

The protagonist, Pepa, a television actor best known for her role as the mother of a serial killer, is coming to terms with an abrupt break-up with her colleague, Ivan (Fernando Guillén). She desperately tries to get in touch with him and goes as far as stalking his ex-wife, Lucía, who has undergone psychiatric treatment, presumably due to her tumultuous marriage. Paulina, Ivan's new girlfriend, has already started showing signs of emotional distress. Pepa's friend Candela, on the other hand, has had an intimate encounter with someone arrested on suspicion of planning a terrorist act, and she now worries about being charged as an accessory.

The plot appears to perpetuate the old-fashioned sexist narrative of hysterical women being steered by hormones (Pepa has just discovered she is pregnant), only to subvert it by providing the reason for their suffering: The film understands nervous breakdowns as an appropriate response of those who are in abusive relationships. In one sense, Almodóvar created a film on the subtle and devastating effects of gaslighting—years before the term entered public parlance. If Pepa feels she is »going crazy,« it is a result of the constant manipulation she is subjected to. While she is coping with the news of her pregnancy, Ivan tries his best to avoid any kind of contact with her, but also urgently needs his belongings from her place. He leaves her multiple voice messages, combining his request with a dishonest reproach for ostensibly ignoring him as well as an assurance that there is no one else in his life. Pepa's journey is about coming to terms with this abusive pattern and realizing their relationship's end would signify freedom from an unrequited relationship with a narcissist.

Ivan's suitcase symbolizes her emotional baggage from years of manipulation and infidelity, and she is not about to hand it over to him without a conversation. She finally feels liberated after she literally tosses the suitcase into a garbage can on the street and therefore no longer needs the closure he belatedly offers towards the end of the film. Lest the symbolism of Pepa's decision to dump his emotional abuse is too subtle, the film also shows Paulina—who had observed Pepa's actions from her rear-view mirror—dragging his suitcase out of the trash. Her simmering rage serves as an early indication of the impending breakdown that she herself might eventually face.

Melodrama is an obvious vehicle for the film's plot, but Almodóvar uses it sartorially (Finch 185). When we first meet Ivan, for example, he is dubbing for the male protagonist in the 1954 American melodrama, *Johnny Guitar.* His voice holds the promise of an epic, heart-breaking romance. Later on, as Pepa dubs the voice for the woman in the same film—filling in the gaps left by Ivan, as it were—the passion he injected into the voiceover seems to break her heart all over again, drowning her, »in a bottomless well« (Deleyto 55).

Pepa's desperation is, in many ways, centered on the voice she longs to hear one last time—something she incidentally shares with Lucía. Ivan's ex-wife reveals that she regained her memory, but not her sanity, in a psychiatric home after she heard his unforgettable voice on television. On the significance of Ivan's voice, Deleyto writes that »it is not his own but that of Johnny,« and the female protagonist of *Johnny Guitar*, Vienna, holds the key to »not only Pepa's emotional state but that of most of the other women in the film« (55). When Pepa faints at the end of the dialogue between Johnny and Vienna, it is in response to the passion of the characters on screen, »as something provoked by artifice, something itself artificial and only textual« (56). Almodóvar's characters, according to Deleyto, do not speak like Spaniards, but rather as dubbed voices of American film protagonists (54). His interpretation of melodrama is closer to a parody of American melodrama films, where affected dialogue and loud colors serve the purpose of furthering the narrative. In other words, there is nothing organic about how the story in *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios* advances.

The parody also allows its author, that is, Almodóvar, several degrees of separation from the text. Does he endorse some of what comes across as blatantly sexist and inappropriate because of a belief that women who »know how to suffer« are more interesting (Forbes 131)? Or is he simply letting his characters be themselves and allowing the audience to observe them at a critical distance? These are not easily answerable questions.

According to Jill Forbes, »on the one hand […] *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* is a cleverly choreographed, slick and nicely observed comedy of manners with enough slapstick to keep most viewers smiling, and several fine performances. On the other hand, it has a profoundly reactionary side which is felt in the ambiguities of the authorial position, the unease experienced when the totally sympathetic heroine is maltreated by her creator by being placed in a false position« (131). The film is, similarly, insensitive to both Candela and Paulina. Carlos (played by Antonio Banderas), Ivan's son, repeatedly kisses Candela without her consent when she is in an extremely disturbed state, but she only half-heartedly reprimands him. Later, his mother observes that he really is his father's son. The »men will be men« joke resurfaces more than once.

Paulina, the »feminist« lawyer, is presented as fraudulent in that she disavows notions of feminist sisterhood and solidarity. And yet, it is possible to see the hostile, jealous »other woman« as slowly moving towards an emotional crisis due to her relationship with Ivan. In one sense, Almodóvar may be suggesting that even feminist women may be gaslit by manipulative men.

The director provides clues on where to locate his own positionality in a 2009 film, *Broken Embraces*, a self-referential text that satirizes the sets of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. The film comes across as a therapeutic exercise, perhaps aimed at reconstructing the emotional undercurrents that textured the making of the 1988 classic. Almodóvar implies that it may just be a set of vague and allegorical recollections, since the director, here Mateo Blanco (played by Lluís Homar), has several gaps in his memory that other characters help fill.

Broken Embraces is also a tale of passion, infidelity, and jealousy, told with his trademark irreverent humor—a melodramatic sequel of sorts. The plot includes a jealous lover (this time a man) who schemes for revenge—again reminiscent of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. In the 1988 film, both Pepa and Lucía want to murder Ivan at different points in the story with the latter executing her plan without success. In the 2009 film, the »revenge« is executed by one jealous lover and abetted by another ex-lover, and it leads to Mateo losing his eyesight and his lover (played by Penelope Cruz) being killed. He is still grieving the loss of the woman he believed was the love of his life when a young man, who is secretly also his son, offers to help him connect the dots and eventually heal his wounds. It is, in some ways, evocative of Carlos in the 1988 film, who had no real relationship with his father and, yet, willingly helps Pepa fix the damage inflicted by the former.

Broken Embraces is about a writer and director who is likely more self-aware and melancholic about love and loss than the maker of *Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios*. The analogy of emotional baggage is underlined heavily with the title of the film-within-a-film: *Chicas y maletas* (»girls and suitcases«). While in the 1988 film it was the women who came with emotional baggage, the »and« of this title suggests that Almodóvar himself had some issues to work through.

References

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